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**U.S. ARMY FAMILIES
IN USAREUR**

COPING WITH SEPARATION



***THE GOOD,
THE BAD,
&
THE HELPFUL...***

**DEPLOYMENT EXPERIENCES
OF ARMY SPOUSES**

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

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A WORD OF INTRODUCTION...

Researchers at the U.S. Army Medical Research Unit in Heidelberg recently conducted a study of health and coping among spouses of USAREUR soldiers during a six-month peacekeeping deployment. Many of these wives (and a few husbands too) were interviewed in depth as to their thoughts and feelings about the deployment, and their strategies for coping. This booklet is an attempt to capture some of the wisdom contained in what these spouses told us, in the hope that other USAREUR families facing similar circumstances may benefit.

We are grateful to all those who took the time to speak to us with such honesty and insight. There were no plans to create such a booklet at the time of the study, but what these spouses had to say was too rich for mere statistical analysis. This pamphlet contains just a sampling of what they told us, in their own words. It is not a "how to" guide, but a set of reference points. As you read this, you will see the deployment separation went more smoothly for some than for others. Whether your own experience is a positive or a negative one, we hope you will understand that you are not alone, and that there are many resources available to ease the burden of deployment separation.

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1. GETTING THE NEWS...

'I'm excited for him, I wish I could have gone. I didn't like the danger aspect, but I knew it was his job. He's not a bank teller. I just have to accept it. I was proud and scared.'

'Scared. I didn't want him to go, he wanted to do it. [I was] scared of being alone without him. I didn't think he'd be in danger but I didn't want him to miss his daughter.'

'I had no problem, that's his job. I miss him, but I'm independent so I'm OK.'

'I'm disappointed. I thought, here we go again, being a single parent.'

'He asked, "is it OK if I volunteer?" My first reaction was "Oh my God, how will I cope? What will I do for six months? I'll pack up and go home." Then, I thought about it and decided to stick it out since my home is here now. I'm glad I did.'

'I expected it, I knew she'd be going somewhere. It's better than some other places, they have an established base to work from. It's part of what the paycheck is for, but I wasn't happy or excited about it.'

'Sad, obviously, a little bit scared, and then you get used to the idea. The more you learn about it, the easier it gets. It's a chance for personal growth, to gain independence. I was always with him, we married right after high school, there was no chance to be on my own.'

'Based on the previous deployment, I knew to expect: long nights, long weekends and that I'd get every complaint...'

2. FINDING OUT WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT...

- * **ASK**
- * **LISTEN**
- * **LEARN**

'I've gone to three [Family support group meetings], I've missed only one. They're nice, you don't worry about cooking, everyone brings food and it's fun. No one is snobbish, [the rear detachment commander's] wife goes and so we get information.'

'I attended the predeployment briefing in [our community]. It was good to see slides, the map and hear information.'

'I saw the videotape from the commander, a great video, I would like to see in the privacy of my own home... I watch CNN.'

'I get information from FSG... newspaper, AFN, *sometimes Stars and Stripes*.'

'I only talk to my husband. I only know what he tells me.'

'The best thing is the newsletter. Yes, I get it, and I can write a funny note in it and get updated information every month.'

'The predeployment briefing was very good. [The commander's] slides helped decrease our feelings of uncertainty. There was an adequate range of presenters. It was the first time we got the chance to meet other spouses which was important. I have gone to all the FSG meetings. I've found them very helpful. I don't understand the spouses who don't want contact even with the chain of concern. The FSG doesn't worry about rank, it's relatively free of rank consciousness... The FSG has provided me social contact. I wish we could have meetings more than once a month. Our dinners are held every other week. The dinners are more special than the meetings themselves.'

3. THOSE FIRST FEW MONTHS...

- * LONELY**
- * EXCITED**
- * CHALLENGED**
- * EXHAUSTED**
- * OVERWHELMED**

'Sometimes it is lonely. And being responsible for kids and making dinner can get exhausting because there is no time out, and I can't NOT watch my son, which means dinner is sometimes at 9 p.m. It's especially bad if I've had a hard day's work. I have no free time, I could use a vacation. I don't have any problems. I see myself as having always been independent and my husband knows that even if he'd like me to notice more that he's gone, I don't.'

'I'm trying to care for three households. In the States, here, and for my husband [via care packages]. I haven't heard from him in a while and had problems at work and no one to talk to. I'm sleeping a lot more, and don't want to get up. I slept 48 hours, Friday through Sunday, I was up only 8 hours. I'm eating more and I munch a lot.'

'I'm bored, with four kids, I can't go anywhere. I'm isolated with the kids. It's lonely. The weekends and holidays are especially hard. It's better when the kids are not in school, it keeps me busier and they can stay up late with me but during school they can't, although it's also boring for the kids. I can't do the things I wanted to do with them.'

'I'm losing my patience with the kids, my husband is not there to pick up the slack. I'm also feeling lonely, depressed, especially on weekends. I'm eating less, and I'm having some sleepless nights. I got my driver's license but I'm not sure if the car will last until my husband gets back.'

'Weekends are especially difficult because it's just the kids, I'm in charge of things like the car lien and childrearing. I have to be the "bad" [parent] now. I miss having someone to do things with, I miss making plans, especially on weekends.'

'On Father's Day, I chose to go with the FSG and was glad. The FSG was where I fitted in better without my husband. . . . I know how the military works. . . . I know it will pass. I go to movies with the kids and go shopping. I have resources, people I can go to for help. My relationship with my husband is strong. We don't have any big problems, so he can concentrate.'

'I spend more money shopping, I have lost weight, I found more things to do by myself and became more independent. I learned more about the bills, I didn't know all that before.'

'I'm taking care of things in terms of the house: yard, water heater, the car radio was stolen, things he'd normally worry about. It's the extra responsibility. Not having someone to talk to is stressful, and having a second opinion is kind of nice.'

'I'm better at handling the separation than my husband. I'm not sleeping well, so I know I'm stressed out but I can't pinpoint it. I'm doing what I want, but I am eating more, especially at night. I'm easily blown away by little things. The first month was harder, I wished I was working then, but now I enjoy not working. . . I'm not cheerful, but on an even keel.'

'Being a single parent. There's no time to sleep, I'm exhausted. I don't get to do the activities on weekends that I hoped to do with my husband. And all the personal things have to slide, even household things can't be clean now like I wanted them to be. It's hanging over my head. I also have job stress, I'm in a new position and the new commander has been on leave and there's drawdown stress.'

'The biggest issue is time. Not enough time at home doing what needs to be done and more stress at work because of all the deployments.'

'Based on the previous deployment, I knew to expect: long nights, long weekends and that I'd get every complaint. No one else is there to share in the final decisions, I get every complaint from the kids, I have to cope with the problems of kids without a husband. The drawdown is a major stressor because of decreased medical services, decreased school quality. Also we've had a major conflict with the neighbors over noise, my husband is a peacekeeper, but there's no peace here. I have the boys write their father once a week, it's part of a routine.'

4. COPING WHEN YOU'RE BY YOURSELF...

- * KEEP BUSY**
- * LEARN SOMETHING NEW**
- * VOLUNTEER**
- * KEEP IN TOUCH WITH YOUR SPOUSE**
- * REACH OUT TO OTHERS**
- * GET INVOLVED WITH YOUR
FAMILY SUPPORT GROUP**

'I'm taking college classes... I don't give up easily, I try not to think about it. It's what he wants.'

'I got cats for company, so I would have someone to talk with and not go crazy. I take a quilting class, normally I would not go out. And I made one good friend. For me, it's unusual because I'm not into socializing. . . It's not his fault, I realized his work schedule is so long, so I stopped getting angry because it would make him angry too.'

'It's not so bad because we don't have children. I can take care of myself. I'm an introvert, I like being alone and can entertain myself. I rely on family and friends too. I take off in my car and go exploring.'

'I see myself as independent. In comparison to the hassle with traveling from the airport ... when I first got here, I feel like I can handle anything. Keeping busy is a big thing, I volunteer a lot. . . I really like being alone, doing the finances and schedule my own way.'

'[I've used] medication to calm down during the roughest period. I went to the US for 6 weeks, I couldn't imagine staying here without him.'

'I stay very busy, I'm very involved in the Church. Talking to other women, I check on ones I know. . . I don't know what I would do without my neighbor. We spend every day and weekend together.'

'I stay very active and busy with exercise and softball, I spend about four hours a day in the gym. I am jealous, I would like to go on the deployment, I even volunteered but my specialty is needed here. . . . Uncle Sam calls, do your duty. It's a chance to save money, to work out more in the gym, not have to cook and clean and shop so much...

...I told my male friends, "she's gone, come over and keep me company." We'll have a lifetime together so what's a few months?'

'It's not as bad as for those with kids. I don't think I could cope if I had kids. I read, write letters, clean house, organize photos, go for walks, work. I'm proud of him, I keep a positive attitude... I've grown really independent...'

'...I have friends but it's not the same. They have their own lives, I felt like a third wheel, my life is stuck on hold. I got a part-time job, couple nights a week helped a lot...'

'I have a good support network, although I have to initiate it. I tell myself this is temporary. I'm anticipating his return with the calendar.'

'I got a job to help some, to keep from going into a depression, sitting around thinking about it. I also have friends. I go out with a girlfriend on Saturday nights, it makes the week go by faster with this break in routine. Being in Europe, I have to stay strong. I've matured a lot since the last deployment. The kids provide a reason to keep it together.'

'I write my feelings down and read it but don't send it to him. I'm starting stress management classes here.'

'If I get out with people, and have things planned, then it's not hard, but on weekends I'm more lonely, I sit around. Especially in the summer, everyone's out with the family. But it's up to me as to whether it gets to me or not. It goes in phases, some days are harder than others. I don't eat as well because I'm not cooking. I stayed up later for a while, now I go to bed earlier.'

'I used family support groups for social contacts and emotional support. I feel used to him going away a lot . . . The Chaplain was supportive in coping with a friend's death.'

5. COPING WHEN YOU HAVE KIDS...

- *REMEMBER IT'S HARD ON THEM TOO**
- *TAKE TIME FOR YOURSELF WHEN YOU CAN**
- *REST WHEN YOU CAN**
- *RELAX YOUR EXPECTATIONS...**
(YOU CAN'T DO IT ALL)
- *KEEP IN TOUCH WITH YOUR SPOUSE**
- *REACH OUT TO OTHERS**
- *GET INVOLVED WITH YOUR**
FAMILY SUPPORT GROUP

'I've been through this before, I relax the rules and standards. Go to bed and still be alive is the goal, anything beyond that is overkill...'

'I talk a lot. I go out once a week, usually Saturday. I go to [the local] market. I go out to dinner every 2 weeks with the Family Support Group women. It's fun. I didn't think of myself as an 'Army Wife'. ... It means I need to be more independent, but it's not as hard as I thought. I proved something to myself. . . . I keep track of the days on a calendar, I talk with friends on the playground in evening, I send kids to daycare once or twice a week so I can have time for myself. '

'I gave my 3 1/2 year old to a friend to get a break. I go out for dinner, cook less, do what I feel like doing. I deal with it, I can't crawl into a space. Work helps.'

'I've been keeping a journal. . . I just deal with it as it comes. . . . I didn't get that upset about it, I'm proud of him. . . . Organizing [a family support group activity] makes me think about things other than kids. My friendship with a neighbor is like a family for myself and kids. FSGs [Family Support Groups] and once a month dinner with wives from FSG is very nice and fun. I send kids to the babysitter, it's good to get out and away from the kids. The kids will keep me going, they help me focus.'

'I did not want to be a "single parent", I'm not happy with the idea. . . . I had numbness [neurological symptoms] diagnosed as a migraine. .. It's been more frequent during the deployment. I cope by relaxing and taking deep breaths.'

'They're more aggressive, more aches and pains, worries about fighting, missing birthdays, especially my daughter, my son is too young.'

'The little one wakes up in the night crying, she wants her Daddy. The little one doesn't want to go to school and sometimes says, "I hate the Army." The older kids don't listen as well to me. They mind their father better. The other two children are looking forward to starting school next week.'

'I told my son, Dad was going to be gone for six months. My son doesn't understand what six months is. He can't visualize it. So one weekend, I guess my husband had nothing to do, he sat down and drew up 8 1/2 x 11 calendars for each month. He marked the last day (OCT 11) with "daddy's home", drew a little airplane in. He sent it to me it and told me to put it up on wall in my son's room, have him mark off each passing day with an X. So he's doing that every day. Of course when my husband was here on leave, he stopped. He came to me yesterday, "Mom, I have to mark off my days!" It's very good for him, helps him visualize the time Dad will be gone. Not many fathers would think about doing that! I showed it to my friend at work and she cried. We told our son every day that Dad was leaving. My son won't sleep by himself since his Dad deployed. My husband doesn't like his son sleeping with me. . . . Every other day, I have to punish him now to get him to behave. When my husband was here, he would respond right away. He doesn't listen, I have to tell him ten times. He responds right away when dad tells him.'

AND FINALLY...

6. USE AVAILABLE RESOURCES

DON'T HESITATE...

**USE THE RESOURCES THAT
ARE AVAILABLE TO YOU!**

YOUR:

**** FAMILY SUPPORT GROUP***

**** CHAIN OF CONCERN***

&

**** REAR DETACHMENT***

ASK SOMEONE ABOUT...

*** ARMY COMMUNITY SERVICES**

*** SOCIAL WORK SERVICES**

*** CHILD DEVELOPMENT CENTER**

*** LEGAL SERVICES**

*** BANK REPRESENTATIVES**

*** POSTAL REPRESENTATIVES**


*** CHAPLAINS**

*** AMERICAN RED CROSS**

*** CHAMPUS ADVISORS**

*** PATIENT LIAISON**

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